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LA VITA NUOVA, SONETTO XI

Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore,
per che si fa gentil ciò ch'ella mira;
ov'ella passa, ogn'uom vèr lei si gira,
e cui saluta fa tremar lo core,
 sì che, bassando il viso, tutto ismore,
e d'ogni su' difetto allor sospira:
fugge dinanzi a lei superbia ed ira;
aiutatemi, donne, farle onore.
Ogne dolcezza e ogne pensiero umile
nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente;
ond'è laudato chi prima la vide.
Quel ch'ella par quand'un poco sorride,
non si può dire, né tenere a mente,
sì è novo miracolo e gentile.

Line eleven of this sonnet,

ond'è laudato chi prima la vide,

has been variously interpreted. The majority of commentators, following Todeschini and D'Ancona, take *prima* as meaning "first," i.e., "before others." *Chi* would refer to Dante himself, who saw Beatrice as a child. Morandi,¹ stressing the sense of "first," would rather have *chi* refer to Beatrice's father and mother, praised for having brought her up so well (*d'aver saputo così mirabilmente educarla*). Scherillo expands *prima* into *subito sulla sua via*, that is, "early on his [Dante's] way." Thus Dante, thanks to a longer subjection to her benign influence, would have become more worthy of praise.² Melodia makes *prima* equivalent to *per la prima volta*. The meaning of the line would then be: He is rendered worthy of praise who has seen Beatrice for the first time, or only once.³

An objection common to all of these interpretations is that no one of them seems to fit into the logic of the whole sonnet. The theme

¹ *Antologia di prose*, Città di Castello (1900), p. 802, n. 3. Cited by Melodia.

² *La Vita Nuova* (Milano, 1911), p. 135, n. 1.

³ *Id.* (Milano, 1905), p. 155, n. 17.

of the sonnet is the universality of Beatrice's salutary influence. Indeed, that influence is so universal that "miraculously," in contravention of the creed of the *dolce stil* just professed by Dante in Sonnet X, the virtue of Love in her eyes

fa gentile *tutto* ciò che vede; e questo è tanto a dire, quanto inducere Amore in potenza *la ove non è*.¹

A sudden claim within the sonnet for exceptional advantage on grounds of priority of acquaintance or otherwise seems beside the point. Melodia's rendering, apart from the strained sense attributed to *prima*, seems at once banal and supererogatory. The whole point of the sonnet is, as just said, to declare the miracle-working power of Beatrice. Dante knew well enough that no man can do miracles, "except God be with him."² And God does not have to try, try again.

The octave of the sonnet declares a twofold effect of Beatrice upon the heart of the passer-by, through his highest senses, sight and hearing. First, Love in her eyes, having as a magnet drawn his eyes, so irradiates his heart that, however base it may have been, it is made *gentil*, susceptible of love. This is a "miracle," because it transcends the natural law of Love, as laid down by "the Sage,"³

Fere lo sole il fango tutto 'l giorno,
vile riman⁴

Secondly, Beatrice's spoken salutation then moves the now susceptible heart to active love, the first effect of which is contrition. In the contrite heart may not abide "pride and wrath."

So far the octave. The heart is purged and receptive. The sestet begins by reciting the positive complement to this negative effect of her spoken word. In principle, Eunoë is tasted after Lethe.

Ogne dolcezza e ogni pensiero umile
nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente

By grace infused by her, the heart has now achieved merit. Recognition and reward of this merit is her smile, the effect of which upon the loving and humble heart is beyond words. The heart is as if in

¹ *La Vita Nuova*, ed. Moore, 2da. ed., cap. xxi, ll. 36-38.

² John 3:2.

³ Guinicelli. Cf. Son. X, l. 2.

⁴ *Al cor gentil*, ll. 31-32.

Paradise. The sonnet closes in a mood anticipatory of that of the last sonnet of the *Vita Nuova*.

Thus the sonnet presents three stages of beneficent effect: first, susceptibility of love; secondly, activity of love, driving out pride and wrath, and receiving sweetness and humility; thirdly, rewarding bliss. The first effect, a "miracle," is analogous to the gift of grace of God. But one is not praised for receiving a boon. The second effect, on the other hand, is an activity by which merit is acquired, no less because the activity is in response to a divine call. Therefore, after declaring the good deeds of the heart which has cast out pride and wrath and taken on sweetness and humility, it is fitting to say that the heart that had before received grace without merit of its own is *now* praised, or praiseworthy. This is just what Dante does say, only, substituting cause for effect,

Ond'è laudato chi prima la vide,

"Wherefore he is praised who *before* saw her," that is, through sight received that grace of potential love without which his meritorious actual loving-service would have been impossible.¹

Again, the first and third effects are logically bound together by two common elements. Both are "miraculous," the third also ineffable; both are achieved through the highest sense, sight. Therefore, line 11 links the three effects. He is praised who before saw her, because, further inspired by her spoken salutation, he is able to achieve merit. When he then sees her miraculous smile, he is rewarded by more than praise, by ineffable bliss.

Thus the heart of the recipient is acted upon, twice through his eyes, once through his ears. The effects are achieved, on the other hand, once by the act of Beatrice's eyes, twice by the acts of her mouth, to wit, "her sweetest speaking," and "her marvelous smile."²

It may be observed, in conclusion, that chapter xi of the *Vita Nuova* presents an analogous threefold sequence of effects of Beatrice on Dante. First, her appearance, arousing hope of her salutation, kindles the flame of love in his heart; and love induces humility. Secondly, when she has drawn near enough to bestow her salutation,

¹ *Prima* is used in the same sense in *Vita Nuova*, Son. XIV, ll. 42-44: *avvegna ch'io fossi altro che prima*. For the significance of *laudato*, cf. *Conv.*, IV, xviii, 22-25.

² Cf. "division" of Son. XI, cap. xxi, ll. 23-55.

a spirit of love takes possession of his eyes, commanding them to honor her. Thirdly, at her salutation itself, love in him has such excess of sweetness (*dolcezza*) that his body moves like a heavy, inanimate thing. Here are implied the three stages of Sonnet XI: the grace of the disposition to love conferred; the meritorious lovingservice of praise inspired; the reward of almost overwhelming bliss given. The three effects are represented as proceeding from the salutation alone, as that is successively anticipated, imminent, and realized; whereas in the sonnet they are related each to its separate cause—Beatrice's gaze, her salutation, her smile. The introspective analysis of chapter xi foreshadows dimly the exact doctrine, symbolically expressed, of the sonnet. Dante has progressed farther in that "intelligence of love" which is the goal of his "new life," as intelligence of the "Love which moves the sun and other stars" is the goal of his supramundane pilgrimage.

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